Rusty Morrison
Confronting Limitations
rustymorrison.com
Poesy Café
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Presenter: Tom Corrado

I see my writing process as one in which I work to heighten the echo of resonance in the language, as the words become a sounding board for whatever energies are arriving, asking to be heard.

Why Rusty Morrison?

2010. I'm in a used bookstore in Schenectady, New York, thumbing through a copy of postmodern poet Rusty Morrison's second book of poems, *the true keeps calm biding its story,* and I'm blown away by the format of the poems: nine groups of six, nine-line poems, unpunctuated, right-justified, all titled "please advise stop," each line ending with "stop," "please," or "please advise," the clipped language like a telegram used to plumb the depths of grief over the death of the speaker's father, punctuating the limitations of language to manage loss, yet creating an intensely dark intimate work.

please advise stop

I was dragging a ladder slowly over stones stop
it was only from out of my thoughts that I could climb stop
not from the room please

my father's dying offered an indelicate washing of my perception stop
the way the centers of some syllables scrub away
all other sound stop
his corpse merely preparing to speak its new name at the speed of nightfalling
please

each loss grows from a previously unremarkable vestigial organ stop
will I act now as if with a new limb stop
a phantom limb of the familial please advise

I am hooked! I begin buying Morrison's books, reading everything I can find about her and her poetry.

Bio

Rusty Morrison was born on July 12, 1956. After earning a BA in English from Mills College in Oakland, California, and an MA in Education from California State University in San Francisco, she taught high school English for 19 years before earning an MFA in Poetry from Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. Her experiences in working with poet Brenda Hillman at Saint Mary's prompted a midlife career change: *I devoted myself to becoming a poet, essayist, editor, and publisher. It was one of the most significant and rewarding changes I have undergone in my life. And, in so many ways, I have Brenda Hillman to thank for this.*

Morrison has taught in the MFA program at the University of San Francisco and was Poet in Residence at Saint Mary's College in 2009. She has also served as a visiting poet at a number of colleges and universities, including the University of Redlands, Redlands, California; University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona; Boise State University, Boise, Idaho; Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, Oregon; and Milikin University, Decatur, Illinois.

Morrison contracted Hepatitis C in her 20s but did not experience symptoms for several years. Following her diagnosis in middle age, she has focused on work related to disability, some of which were included in the anthology: *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disabilities* (2011).

Morrison and her husband, Ken Keegan, founded Omnidawn Publishing in Richmond, California, in 2001. She has continued as publisher following Ken's death in 2022.

Poetry Books

2004 *Whethering* (The Colorado Prize for Poetry)
2008 *the true keeps calm biding its story* (Ahsahta's Sawtooth Prize, James Laughlin Award, Northern California Book Award, Poetry Society of America's Di Castagnola Award)
2011 *Book of the Given*
2012 *After Urgency* (Tupelo's Dorset Prize)
2014 *Beyond the Chainlink*
2024 *RISK*
202? *Notes from the Understory*

Her work has been anthologized in several publications including *The Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology (2nd Edition, 2013), The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral (2012), The Sonnets: Translating and Rewriting Shakespeare (2012), and Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability (2011).*

Her critical writings and creative nonfictions have appeared in journals including *Chicago Review, Denver Quarterly, Poetry Flash, Verse,* and in the anthology *One Word: Contemporary Writers on the Words They Love or Loathe.*

In 2016, Morrison was a Fellow at Civitella, a residency program for international writers, composers, and visual artists, located in a 15th century castle in the Umbrian region of Italy. This is what she had to say about the experience:

Here at Civitella, I have been able to see more deeply into the manuscript of poems that I brought with me to complete. Not only have I written poems here that extend the trajectory that I had envisioned for the book, I've surprised myself and deeply revised the other poems in the book that have not yet been published. I am excited to say that those poems now have a much more provocative and intuition-driven energy. If I hadn't had these six weeks in this incredibly special environment, I don't think I would have found the wider and more ranging levels of deep attention that have taken the work to a more exciting level than I'd previously conceived for it. This kind of evolution is crucial to a writer's craft: the insights I've gained into this manuscript will nourish the work I will do in the future. Tonight, the moon is glowing a pink that I've never seen, something that I learned can happen here. But I would have missed seeing it if one of the other Fellows had not let me know that I might walk out to the lawn for the experience. I mention this, too, because if it hadn't been for the friendships I've made here with the other Fellows - visual artists, sound artists, musicians, composers, film and installation artists, and writers - I would have missed so many opportunities to see and explore new ideas that have expanded my vision. And, I have such gratitude for the director, Dana Prescott, who has shared so much with all of us - I am thinking at this moment of her conversations during the fine dinners, her love of this area of Italy, of the art and architecture, and of the paintings by Piero Della Francesca, which she guided us to more deeply appreciate during museum visits. And, I am so grateful to the incredible staff members, each of them, in their own way, has helped to create an environment where new ideas have room to fully evolve, and new experiences can deeply enhance the interior journeying that has been so rich and rewarding to the trajectory of my poems.

Honors and Awards

2019: Fellowship Award from UC Berkeley's Arts and Research Center and the Engaging the Senses Foundation
2017: Residency Awarded by Civitella Foundation in Umbria, Italy
2012: Fellowship Award for a four-week Residency at the Vermont Studio Center
2010: Dorset Prize, Tupelo Press

2009: George Bogin Memorial Award, Poetry Society of America
2009: Northern California Book Award
2008: James Laughlin Award, Academy of American Poets
2007: Sawtooth Poetry Prize, Ahsahta Press, Boise State University, Idaho
2007: Alice Di Castagnola Memorial Award, Poetry Society of America
2006: Cecil Hemley Memorial Award, Poetry Society of America
2004: Colorado Prize for Poetry, Colorado State University
2003: Robert H. Winner Award, Poetry Society of America
2002: Lori & Deke Hunter Residency Fellowship Djerassi Artists Program

Poetics

The poet Susan Howe has praised Morrison's poetry as *absolutely original and distinguished by a contemplative visionary quietism . . . her writing, at once tender and erudite, pushes the imagination past its boundaries, past the stilled-death specificity of appearances, in order to blur every limit it makes.*

In a 2016 interview with Julian Gewirtz, in responding to a question about the importance of vulnerability and spontaneity to her work, Morrison talked about how a fire had made it necessary to relocate Omnidawn Publishing: *it's an enormous challenge to not let the struggles of my worklife take over my poetry life. in the past weeks, i've been trying to be tough and not let the feelings i have about all of this overwhelm me, or take me out of the hour i try to give myself in the morning to write. but a crisis like this wants to be welcomed into my poems - the crisis generates so much fear in me, but attending to that fear will allow my writing to remain relevant - real to me, and i hope to readers . . . bringing the shock of displacement into the poems themselves, this risk is the only way to keep writing. but there's no simple answer to the question i ask myself each morning: how to use the actual, as difficult as it is to face, and let it change the directions and dimensions of the poems i'm writing. if i don't let myself be vulnerable to any answer that comes, then i may miss the most compelling, albeit frightening trajectories my work might find and follow.*

Known for her innovative use and re-use of form and line, Morrison has been praised for the way she pairs lyric's mimicry of interiority with philosophy's relentless self-scrutiny.

I see my writing process as one in which I work to heighten the echo of resonance in the language, as the words become a sounding board for whatever energies are arriving, asking to be heard. I revise quite a lot. For me, the first ideas that I "feel" seem to have color/shape/sound of energy/energies, but I don't often see that the words I put down on the page have the flexibility to resonate fully with what that "something" might be that I'm feeling. As I work in the meditative state of re-vision, I think of it as finding words that most fully reverberate. I listen with my body as much as my mind. I actually feel a hum, a tingle, a difference in my skin, especially around my ears, when things are moving. I know

that sounds odd, but I think the body knows in ways that support the poem's deepest resonances.

For Morrison, poetry translates bodily pain - the limitations imposed by her disability - in a seemingly therapeutic manner, into spoken and written language.

As a poet, I have experienced directly the ways that a formal constraint can hone the clarity, intensity, and inspired power of a writing project. In similar ways, a physical constraint, such as illness, can engender surprising perceptual attunement in the body. . . . I feel that illness has been a profound teacher, its lessons of limitation have opened me, and deepened my relationship to the formal work of the poem, the physical body of the poem/its form, and how that is always speaking a language that is embedded in content.

For Morrison, constraint allows creativity to take place.

In her latest book of poems, *RISK,* she uses a constraining form of seven-syllable segments with breaks between to explore questions of limitation. In these poems, she is not just writing about constraints, but living inside and seeing how to manage them. In this way, the speaker of these poems actively experiences limitations as event, not aftermath, inviting the reader to confront what lies beyond the borders of comfort and convention.

Drawing on the idea of philosopher and critic Hélène Cixous who writes that *the border makes up the homeland, it prohibits and gives passage in the same stroke,* Morrison's work uses the constraints of borders and framings, sometimes pushing against and moving beyond them to explore limitations and offer understanding.

In writing RISK, I initially was convinced that a limitation in the form could speak to me about the limitations I inflict upon myself, versus those that are unavoidable in my life. By using a constraining form, I would not just write about limitation, I'd live inside limitation in the work and then see how I handled it. I would experience limitation as event, not aftermath.

LINING THE SIDEWALK WHERE YOU WALK

Lining the sidewalk where you walk the block each night at dusk
are trees. Can't name their species, let alone where their image
in your mind has taken root. Tonight they each seem to let
fall a shadow in your path, more than the sun's setting could
cause. What is "cause"? How would you really know to what or whom
it belongs? Do you even know what causes might compel
you and from what conditions they might arise? This tree seems
inscrutable, foliaged in its anonymity.
Do you know as little of your neighbors? Is this even
how you live day to day with Ken, your husband? You do know

his given name but what name does he wear within himself?
Does it change annually or is he perennial?
Walk around the block again, you're not ready to go home.
Are these the same trees they were 45 minutes ago?
Open your front door, does your key fit the lock? Have you
already converted this stranger into whoever
you just believe him to be? Outside is the gloaming hour.
Ask this man you call Ken to go back into it with you,
to listen for the private, plosive anarchies that might
be wind in the branches, or the exhaling of earth that's
covered in concrete. Here, too, a loud chorus of sighs from
the neighbors' open windows. Sounds you've never tried to hear
or comprehend, but could you? Is it better to try, fail?
But recognize how something inexplicable comes, as
a sensitivity that's beyond price? You recall Ken's
sighing, what you hear each night, but ignore, as if a sigh
could ever be meaningless, be it husband's, be it wind's,
be it leaves falling right here that you'll never see again.

All the poems in RISK that are not titled "Narrow Negotiations" have 14 syllables in each line with a caesura between the first seven syllables and the last seven syllables. I wanted this approach to let me experience formally how challenging it is to create meaningful balance in my life.

Besides these poems, there are also poems scattered through the manuscript that are titled "Narrow Negotiations," each composed of seven couplets (14 lines per poem), each line having seven syllables (as does the title "Narrow Negotiations").

Ann Lauterbach points out that the "convergence of subject matter with form releases content." I found that the forms I created caused a contentiousness in my use of syntax that forced me to diverge from my more expected trajectories of thought, and so the forms exposed a content with more contextual resources than I'd previously had access to.

But contrived structures can obscure as much as they reveal; my obsessions are powerful. I had to let the poems continue to ask me if I was writing in support of my intuitions about freedom or if I was sometimes avoiding them. Once I saw, in the writing, how easily I could delude myself, I started to see it in my life.

I often begin a poem with the description of a place where I was, &/or an experience I was in the midst of, that keeps coming back into my mind. What happens as I write is that images, the details from the experience shift and draw in other ideas that my logical mind would never think could be aligned. I find that the images arrive, seemingly of their own volition. Because of the strict form, it's often true that the idea I start a line with will not "fit" in the syllabics I require. I find myself pausing the writing, sometimes going back to the

place that I am writing about, letting more ideas arise, and then rushing back home to jot them down. If it weren't for the requirement of seven syllables then a caesura, I would not have been able to follow the poem toward ideas I'd never have come to on my own.

This happened early in the poem, LINING THE SIDEWALK WHERE YOU WALK. I wrote this:

...Tonight they each seem to let
fall a shadow in your path, more than the sun's setting could
cause. What is "cause"? How would you really know to what or whom
it belongs? Do you even know what causes might compel
you and from what conditions they might arise?"
Then I was stuck... I went outside and found this come to my mind:
"This tree seems / inscrutable, foliaged in its anonymity.
Do you know as little of your neighbors?"

I was thrilled to "find" the idea of trees seeming inscrutable, which came out of my sense of how I didn't know what to write next. And I got the work "foliage" which led me forward to "anonymity." The idea about the neighbors also came as a way to go forward. I will say that many poems of mine end up as scraps, they won't coalesce. Those poems remain in my "saved lines" doc files. When I'm stuck, I often visit that set of lines... Surprisingly, what wouldn't resolve in a poem from weeks ago is ideal for the poem I'm working on now.

NARROW NEGOTIATIONS (4th)

Pine needles dead on the limb
blur as wind shivers them loose

from their outlines for a split
instant then each snaps back. Wind

is a workshop of freedoms
that only intuition

turned kaleidoscopic can
perceive. What is it you've been

dead to that's within yourself?
Your outline is breathing. Look.

See a world of new life forms
the death in you fertilized

to let each instant you live

riot with new frequencies.

Though these are much shorter than the other poems in the book, they were more demanding to write. What made them most strenuous was that they almost all begin with an image, which then must yield to me a surprising idea, perhaps a paradox I want to tease farther open. But I had to keep them grounded in actual images that can arrive, or "bud" from the first image. I also had to find an end as I reached the seventh couplet; an end that didn't explain the poem, but instead surprised me further. The surprise I wanted needed to have an image's tenacity and yet be nearly gossamer in appearance. This poem ends:

let each instant you live
riot with new frequencies.

I was thrilled with the word "riot," which suggests chaos, but then took me to "new frequencies" which suggested to me that, from out of a seeming riot, and new understanding can be found, a new dimension of listening. It made me think of having a new radio that had a higher sensitivity to catch more radio stations. Of course, every reader will come to this in their own way. I can only hope that they find something here that is enlivening to them.

Takeaway

Morrison mines constraint, limitation, and control, excavating memories to explore the unknowable, to address the Modernist's charge to *make it new.* Her stance on syntactic limitation *as event, not aftermath*, allows for an examination of the self, language, and others, urging one to write into abandonment, to see a world of new life forms, born of a refined poetic sensibility.

Poems/Notes

WALK WATCH (7)

It's long before sunup as I come to the
block where the Arlington is steepest.
Thighs ache to keep my pace. The ache is
one sensation I feel before it vanishes into
idea. How few I recognize and let the
recognition unfold. Talking to Alex
yesterday in the café—telling her that I'd
shot meth for a year. What did I feel?
How quickly I was talking myself away
from what I'd begun to say, performing
for her what I wanted to feel, to believe.
Langer explains that illusion is valuable,
but easily missed as what it might offer,

if one lets oneself "handle a figure, no
matter what it gives," and "see the
illusion unmolested." I used to run most
mornings before I ruined my knees. I ran,
I used meth. Now, I use the momentum
of walking—asking my legs for more, to
keep moving a little faster. Yesterday, I
was talking fast, Alex listening. Her
listening was a smile that I wanted, that I
realize is on my lips now, is changing the
way my feet meet the pavement—the
change is a sensation I've not yet tried to
name—a sensation that's wider than
what this one moment could hold?
Already it's lost, disappearing into the
words I use to keep it, the illusory that
language creates. Talking to Alex, I
narrowed a year of needles—a year that
I wasn't ready to recount—into one
illusion to perform. I listen to it now, as I
walk—a faster and faster pace. "Faster"
is the first need that I'm typing now to
report, but not appease. I don't want to
isolate it from other needs, but recognize
it, and its habitat. Hearing my mind
saying "faster, one more block this
morning than yesterday," I follow the
feeling a little farther into its lair before I
turn around, go home. "Home." A word
that won't be appeased or avoided as
illusion. A void.

WALKWATCH (10)

When 4 am dark is narrow, I feel it before
I leave the bed. I pull the narrow into my
thighs, walk out of the house, up the steep
hill of the Arlington. I am sure to wear my
glasses, so I'll see the sharp, narrow lights
far above me succeed in breaking through
night-sky's dark. I need the narrow, now,
in my fingers as I type. I learned it
decades ago, when I started shooting
meth—draw back my thumb at the angle
to balance a syringe's small circular top
on my thumbnail as I pull the correct

dosage of liquid into the syringe, and then feel what I thought was the exacting precision of a changeless certainty. It wasn't. But the skill of narrow precision—all that I've taken with me from my year of shooting meth. I feel it in my thighs on this early-morning walk. In each foot's impact on pavement, risking wherever precision leads—this morning I step into fear. I draw that into the stride, trusting the rhythm of this instant of walking, no matter how it might change the next instant, change me, change where this might lead. Last night, I needed to narrow my eyes as I read the new poem Cassie sent me. So few words on a line. Not forcing a line's meaning to come any sooner than it might have come to her, come for her, as she typed, come for me, now, as I read for the narrower passage within the meaning to take me farther than I knew I'd had the courage for. My left foot first—this has become an obsession of starting out the door in the morning, a form of reliability, a ritual, that I allow to be as frighteningly necessary as the ritual of my childhood, wearing the bit of white lace on my head required for a Catholic girl going into church, even when mass wasn't in session, when no others were in the pews. Once, the lace slipped, fell to the church floor. My sharp intake of breath, so loud that a nun sitting in a pew praying looked up. Such shock on her face—not because the lace fell, I realized, but for the look she saw on mine. What had she seen there? I'm drawing into my thighs that unknowable expression I wore, which remains mine, as I look to the top of the hill where the Arlington turns. I'm filling my lungs, my blood, with that look, which narrows as it gains force—what has always been fear and, more than fear, awareness that nothing can protect me from whatever might come. I draw that in. Langer says, look for any

expression and, whatever expression you are seeking, you will find. At my front door, I notice and reach down to pick up the Monday morning New York Times where it rests this morning in its blue plastic wrapper, and I feel everything is a symptom of the expression I am seeking. I pick up the news and I step inside.

WALKWATCH (11)

Mid-walk, mid-dark, the hill steepest here, and I feel again how I'm frightened of my mind, the texture of my need to talk to myself, the pressure, which has no taste for me. It's the same as when I can't taste the cereal and yogurt in my spoon. Can I ever taste it? Do I want to? Last night, when Ken's eyes were fixed on a difficult email he was composing on his computer screen; I knew better than to interrupt him again. The words I'd wanted to say were inconsequential. I knew this, yet all I could feel was the pressure to be seen and cared about, so large—the pressure, but not the taste of what it would mean to have his eyes on me, friendly eyes. Right now, I want to feel my feet, my pace, walking in this morning's dark, I want to taste the motion, even as I walk too fast, as if to escape the realizations I have when I walk. I want to taste the fear in that. This is a start. I paid so much for the feeling meth gave me, that I thought inured me to everything around me, that I trusted a filled syringe could give. This is a start—even if it's only to be frightened of what I've constructed to take its place. How many houses have I walked past? How much of this moment have I lost? I'm inside my memory of the look on Ken's face when I spoke, needlessly. He didn't understand that I knew what I was saying was unimportant. Knew the abject clarity of useless need in my words. "Abject clarity." Both words have a "t" that hits

sharp and hard, like my feet hitting the pavement in the dark. Pay attention, I tell myself, though my mind is 'rushing' from this moment. I'm already thinking of the work I'll do once I get home, how I'll reread the edits I need to send to a consultation client, and revisit the decision I need to make to accept or not accept a manuscript for publication, and a set of bills I'll organize and then choose which ones to pay. The stars, as I look up, seem too bright in the 4 am sky, now, now, now. A porch light, glowing from the freshly painted house to my left, is smug with factory-furnished meanings of 'welcome' in its warm pearl pleasantry. The manufacturer probably markets it suggestively, as if light had a sensation to impart, and I feel superior in my little realization, which is tasteless and leaves me more bereft, though I want to pretend it is carrying me. I've lost myself again, where the rise is steepest, here, where I'm looking up at my grandmother's face as she keens. I don't want her to see that I'm watching her from my uncomfortable position in her lap. I'm eight. It's the morning after the night she found my grandfather beside her, dead from a heart attack, and I know I've been put here to have some use, while my mother and her cousins manage what is logical to be accomplished in a house where someone irreplaceable has died. The rocking motion of my grandmother, I realize—it's not because of her grief. She's rocking for me, as if this motion would be a comfort as she holds me. I stop walking, but even stillness won't bring back the inkling I'd just had of something more in that memory I should understand. I'm here, in front of my computer screen, afraid to change my posture as I type, knowing any stray motion will break the stride of words moving toward an idea I sense I've already lost. Even here, with my stack of

dog-eared paperbacks beside me. The
steepest part of the Arlington is
somewhere inside each of them. I'll open
one, but the steepest part stays just a
sentence or two ahead of my eyes as I
skim for it, a little more frantic with every
page I turn. It's last night, I'm watching a
movie on Netflix with Ken. We've seen
only 20 minutes but already the ominous
arc of story-line suggests itself. The stars
in that night sky, too, are over-bright, but
the characters in the movie don't consider
looking up. My one foot in front of the
other keeps me watching them, even
though I'm frightened, in the same way
that I keep eating the tasteless food I
chew, the cereal in its yogurt in its spoon,
bite after bite. I sit in my grandmother's
lap, looking for a way out of the moment,
nearly seeing where its edge is fraying.
And I'm looking in, through that frayed
edge, at the girl in her grandmother's lap,
seeing her with the eyes I have now,
which have always been my eyes. Those
eyes are here watching me from just
outside this instant's fraying edge, they
see how much hill I have left to walk in
the dark.

To measure internal activity while it turns all I know to rubble

I repeat "dead" aloud enough times for its meaning to loosen
from sense. Once the word I repeat is no longer comprehensible,
it begins to attack everything else I know.
Giorgio Agamben says devastation is one face of a Genius
that exists inside us. The other face is creation.
The two sounds that begin and end "dead" echo in my ears.
Then a third appears between them. The middle sound, between
the coronal plosives of the letter d, is the ghost.
Agamben tells us that the Genius is within us only as long if
we realize it does not belong to us. Just as existence does not.
Now I begin to voice only the ghost, and watch it 'not appear.'
Is the narrow space between my Genius's two faces
where that ghost lives? When I listen for what will not appear,
I hear my own voicelessness amplify.
My hearing is most acute when I'm naked

in front of the bedroom mirror.
I want voicelessness to create an echoing hollow
inside every word I type.
I feel how listening to find disappearances makes my nipples erect.
Disappearance is my new self-seduction.

About this Poem

I was dealing with the death of someone close. My feelings were complicated, leaving me exhausted. But something in me shifted when reading Giorgio Agamben. He freed me from grieving, allowing me to find a fierceness—a fierceness that asked me to plunge into this moment, then the next, to dive into everything changing. The poem took time to finish. I was standing in front of my mirror, as I describe, when I opened to see the many selves I am disappearing, as I asked myself who I am. Then I wrote the last lines, or the poem wrote them for me.

our aptitude for perishing

you buy disposable Bic / Highlighter pens in four shades
to suggest meanings vary / choose the sleek design for your
desk lamp heedless of wattage / as desolation expands

you fantasize the latest / planet-savior solutions
ignoring incremental / shifts it's hard to focus on
the dove-sheen of shadow soon / you too will be shaded in
your own annihilation / it was Ernst Bloch writing his
hashish protocols who said / every thing teaches us but
what are you learning in your / busy use of objects you

yellow-highlight quotes on a
page as if that means you've been
changed

our aptitude for perishing

reach exhausted hands into / soil still freshly damp the smell
soothing as if you're hearing / a chair gently squeaking floor
boards in an upstairs room where / someone rocks a child toward sleep

but doesn't each poignancy / already seem posthumous
to consider its savor / is like saying to yourself
"forest" when you walk through trees / that are hemmed in on one side

by the highway your ears shut
to traffic-noise eyes nearly
shut

FROM LITERARY POOL, INC., 2015

HEALTH

My body had a sheen once, a long gleam of forestalled
shatter
called moisture. Yesterday is a word I say to lubricate.
Today corrodes,
while the scale I made of pine needles turning brown
scarcely trembles.
I ruined the sky's pale blue hypnosis
with diagnosis.
Static, like a radio's, a whole life might be lost
inside a cough.
There should be some compensatory thickening of dignity
in the afterworld
for useless effort, dried leaves and skin I tried
to water. I add
consonants to forestall false rhymes with wellness. With the aid
of stress accents
apply diversion. For difference, soft dirt and hard stones mix
in hand-dug mounds,
where nothing stays buried for long, for me,
because I like time,
how it defines the distance between the pretty
paper costume
I called purpose and this scavenge.

RECOVERY

This morning, the illness is breached, the nub
of what will become a leafed-stem is emergent from the thick, dumb,
seemingly dead branch, again, wellness
assaults,
raising dust, ruckus of release, the long weeks of inelastic imparticular
begin to rip—such teething sequences
will only be done with me
at death—which probably will be the best of them—though for now
the best has been to watch the sky
teethed of blue when a shock of crows rise in unison to puncture it
and draw the eye past believing sky
is color
in the image from a postcard I've kept
right past the act losing of it during one of my many moves.

RENDERING

My sketch fails.
Notably the eyes.
More important, the lips. Where Demeter and Kore reunite, my mouth
is the work.
My chewable pill
stuck in its plastic sleeve breaks in too many pieces.
I lean down
and lick up
only the visible specs. In the invisible, a monastery. The celestial,
infinite in its manner of giving way,
is unwinding
through a back courtyard gate that an initiate is just now opening, though
she makes no space for me in the contours
of her footsteps.

RESPONSE

The nude sexless figure was positioned in the painting 486 years ago
to meet my glance.
To make the child immortal, Demeter sets the infant on fire each night,
stripping from it all mortal flesh.
The last word of a myth mustn't look back with either guilt or innocence.
"Each night," has neither depth nor surface, but might be
observed as a body of water.
In Niagara, Marilyn Monroe cast as Rose Loomis played a body of water
falling.
Larger-than-life is what we call a movie screen, relentless seduction
stripped of mortal flesh.
It doesn't matter that I'm not the only one the eyes in the painting have been
watching.
I keep any paradox in mind long enough to see how my interpretation of its biases
define me.
Come to the fire wet.
At film's end, Monroe's corpse belongs to the camera, her back arched, her body
striped by shadows crossing the floor of the Niagara Tower.
"In the painting, the figure of Kore was interwoven with the pupil of an eye."
(Stobaeus)
Come to the shadows, don't expect to see where they go.

This Piece of Writing Began

because I cut my first-finger on a long, loping crack in my hand-mirror by tracing
the life-line pattern that I imagined it resembled;

because I can't make it mean anything I could call prophetic, anything I'd understand, but immediately afterward I saw something aligned to its shape, something calmer, smooth, more assured, in the way my cursive writing had changed, I feel more intuitive trust that my handwriting's mirror in my journal is more reflective than glass;

because discussing cursive as a way to write (as I am writing in it, in my journal, and only later typing it into my laptop) seems insignificant to me as a subject—when there are global and local and personal crises that are profoundly important to assess;

because, nonetheless, I find the enormities I face (and that so very many, if not all of us, face in various guises) impossible to write about directly in poetry, in any insight-seeking prose;

because, surprisingly, something as insignificant as considering my reasons to write in cursive—something as insignificant as this kind of subject leaks intuitions about what most frighten me and can create sometimes whole paragraphs on a page I can learn from, I can trust;

because my friend in Idaho writes me only texts, now that she has had another breakdown, and massive doses of B12 injections have begun, or ended, or maybe there's a different doctor she's seeing, since she will not undergo the other treatment plan prescribed;

because she stopped calling me when I asked her to tell me something more about how it's going, anything at all she'd be willing to describe, but it's all too much for her to talk about at all;

because as I handwrite "it's all too much for her" I can see it happen: the "it's all too much" dilates and this time I write it again in enormous cursive, so there's no room for the rest of the phrase ("for her") on the page of my journal, and I realize this might mean that the cliché of "it's all too much" has room in it for anyone, which, if I'd been typing, I'd have deleted too soon, too soon, even though I don't know what to do with it, it's here in ink, and this continuing is in a cursive that is suddenly so tight that I can barely read it, but read it I can;

because even though Oppen said that if, when you are writing, you realize that you've written a word that scares you, then you have started, still I have to get some words onto a page to begin something happening, I can't go directly for what I'm afraid of;

because maybe Oppen meant that all along, meant that the unexpected's arrival in the midst of a sentence or two, is the way the most useful things to fear can come forward, and that's what to watch for, not the known-fear I'm already inured to;

because cursive creates connectivity between letters, which even a frightening word might trust as a net to hold it, hold in it what I can't see yet, until there's enough sediment, word after word, to dig into, to find what I'd otherwise miss;

because what I don't see, I don't believe in, even if it has been there inside me waiting a long time;

because writing in cursive, about writing in cursive, may be creating a kind of magnet that is especially sensitive, especially apt, at drawing more shavings of metallic-fear forward;

because, as I focus on the act of writing, Oppen can come to mind, and I can draw in my journal, looping his name beside the most frightening words, making images of his letters;

because I can see that even frightening words might loop or curve in just the way that a growing-thing bends to align with its climate's forces, and thus survive, even thrive;

because especially frightening words might want some safety, too, and Oppen's name artfully, cursively, doodled beside them might offer some solace;

because what seems silly, embarrassing, outlandish, at first, to me, as I write it, isn't necessarily only that;

because on a journal page, written in ink, I can't immediately delete something that seems silly and outlandish, and since it's there, I'm more inclined to keep following it with more cursive;

because, later, I see how the landscape of 'the outlandish' is a place new insights find fertile;

because whenever I resist what I've started to write (be it something that seems silly, or be it something so serious that to even begin it leaves me blocked), this is likely a habitual, knee-jerk resistance, which is a thought I can't even begin to pose to myself without using a cliché like "knee-jerk";

because such resistance comes, as much, from what I believe others will think of me as what I might think of myself;

because asking my writing-self to disrupt the habitual does mean bringing myself to a liminal site that isn't easy to inhabit;

because that site isn't just in one place, but moves around, with cursive I feel in my hands how it's a site I might find anywhere, at any time;

because it's not exclusive to me;

because so many people I meet on the street, if I really listen to what they tell me, speak in ways that show me they inhabit it, too;

because I handwrite a phrase into my journal that I find again in an old text that fell off my shelf when I thought I was looking for some other book;

because it fell open to a line I'd underlined months ago, on a page I remember keeping the book open to, for a long time;

because the line "surviving is not what we think" (from Cixous) means something different now than it did to me then, I handwrite it on a 3x5 card, cut it in half right across the phrase, and rest one half on my laptop, one half in the pocket where I keep my cell-phone;

because I will have to think about it and conjure the missing part, and something more might be conjured besides;

because Kayla told me that Noa, her eight year old daughter, who is in a class in a good school, isn't taught how to write in cursive, as there's no time in the curriculum for it, and I feel a need to eulogize what's lost, and might not even have known about, if fate hadn't given me Kayla as a friend only recently, and I wouldn't even know that I cared, if I weren't handwriting this now;

because I want to grieve the plants, outmoded things, animals, let alone all the people in countries I don't know—all of which are lost, and I don't know how;

because shame can rise up from that set of words, which is, if I follow it, not only a vibrant, glowing shame but a fear, too, that I need to let be bottomless, even as the cursive gives it a net, and another beneath that, and beneath that is a method of archeology;

because Giorgio Agamben says "the entry point to [perceiving] the present necessarily takes the form of an archeology; an archeology that does not, however, regress to the historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living";

because there is a lot of room inside what I don't understand in the phrase "absolutely incapable of living" I can seek the outlandish there, and cursive won't let me delete anything, not only because it's in ink, but because the net between letters reminds me that there is a kind of netting that the texture of the paper makes between handwritten words on a blank page, and that reminds me that there is a kind of netting between me and everyone I pause to talk with, as I walk to work, a net that still is porous to whatever might come into it from either

of us, or flow from us, from and toward other people and cars passing close to us on the street;

because when Noa's grandfather writes her a letter, he sends two copies, one in cursive and one typed, and Noa begins by 'reading' the one in cursive, though not for English as I'd understand it, she's using her artist's eye to trace patterns in the cursive that only she can see, maybe she's seeing more than if she knew cursive, and so would miss what this form of intuitive translation can be;

because what I'm calling intuitive translation might be taking her to a liminal conversation with her grandfather as well as with her future-self as an artist, so that Noa is simultaneously occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a threshold she might not need to realize she can cross;

because, yesterday, the Yemeni grocer's uncle, for the first time, smiled back at me when I said hello to him, which I don't do often, since where he sits, low and right behind the beef-jerky-&-nuts-tiered offerings, keeps him mostly hidden from us shoppers, beside where Ajam stands, and often beside Ajam is his brother Sali, there at the register in their store, day after day, hour after hour, ringing up people's items, taking cash mostly, since the people in my neighborhood don't use credit cards very often, I'm like them, in that at least;

because cursive asks me what did I really see in his face, was it as much a look of surprise as a smile, which I realize now, even as a smile, I didn't understand;

because I don't know if my face showed him that "not understanding," which I didn't know about at the time;

because believing we'd made some mutually comprehensible connection (and I ignored anything that disagreed with that), was only adding to a lack of comprehension between us;

because it's frightening to trust that we won't know each other as anything more than strangers, and yet still can share something in our faces together, and letting it be true that this is a useful fear to live with;

because all the feelings that I can't clarify are what I did offer him, and, as I write here, I still feel that something of this is what he was open to receiving, surprised though he was, and this still seems like a lot to have happen between us;

because I don't have to fit the pieces together myself, the cursive is merely a net for all of them to sit loosely, as it won't let me speed to fit the meanings together, using the delete key, to form sentences that my thought-synapses are most used to, and most trust;

because cursive does, as the commonplace idea puts it, "take more time than typing," and then I have to type it all again to bring any of it out of the journal, and after letting so much happen in cursive, I am more inclined to keep what I might have disdained as "experiment";

because "experiment" is cognate with "experience" according to Raymond Williams, which is what Claire told me and I haven't had the time, or haven't made the time, to look up;

because I just now realize that those two turns of phrase for the same thing are nearly opposite in what they say: "I haven't had the time" means time is finite, while "haven't made the time" means that I can make more time and more and more, if it's for something I might want;

because I was in Safeway this morning, when a man walks up to me, and since he has two items and I have a cart-full, tells me I should to let him ahead of me, his head is cocked at an angle sharp as the edge in his eyes:

because my mouth says yes, so quickly, that I'm unable to bring the rest of me along, I'm split again, irreconcilably;

because the man in Safeway in line ahead of me has turned toward me, not facing forward as he should, not following rules of standing-in-line personal-distance, which include not staring at the person behind you;

because he is watching me do my best not to look at his ripped nylon white jacket, stained, I just give up and look into his eyes, and he says to me, "You kill me";

because surviving is not what we think;

because I don't know how to read his expression, and as I try I sink deeper and deeper inside it, I say to myself, drowning is not what we think;

because he leaves the line and goes a few lines away from me and is already speaking to another woman in line with a full cart, and I can't see her face, I could move a little to the left to do so, but I don't, invidious comparison might be the result;

because for no reason, I remember how I lied incessantly after mom's first breakdown;

because I can ask myself, as I write this, if any of the multi-syllabic adverbs I use is an attempt to sound smart;

because I can let the answer be "don't know the answer" and I don't have to know why;

because I lied, when I said that Idaho is where my friend lives and I lied about a lot of the specifics about her;

because her eyes are my mother's eyes, which I've never told her, never actually admitted to myself;

because this kind of lie, I call self-protection, but cursive responds that I haven't been truthful about so much in my childhood, and forgotten so much else, that I should not imagine I'm telling much truth now, which isn't my friend's fault, or even my mother's fault, but it's interesting that "fault" comes into this;

because if I were typing I'd have already deleted most all of this;

because the worst thing about listening to NPR in the car, is you can't predict what the next story will do with you;

because it's easy to think that it's just me that the story is doing something with, doing something to, that it's just me being changed by the fact that I'm hearing it, but there's this illogical feeling I have, a question, really: I wonder if because I chance to be listening, the fact that I'm listening and changed by it, might impact others who are also listening right now;

because there's a swelling of realism inside what seems unbelievable in a strong intuition, in something that isn't easy to think, there's a place to survive in what I can think and can't believe, but that swell might be a wave so large I drown in it;

because drowning is not what we think;

because I'd turned on the radio in the middle of the program, I didn't know who was talking, so I had to decide, every few minutes, if I'd leave the radio on, and I almost didn't, I'm that frightened of everything, I realize, just now;

because I write in cursive to find out, but much of the finding out, even in cursive, slips under the waves, and I don't want to go there, dead fish down there but their bones are feeding something;

because I kept listening, I let myself, I realize, be unsafe for a while, but it's a fight, and I can feel it, how often I don't listen at all to anything I deem might drown me, but I could tell she was in her rhythm-ed stroke, moving fast against a current, she was saying "I have a bad memory, it took me years to realize that this is true because I spent years forgetting the abuse";

because I could tell she was strong, the current had made her arms into very sensitive mechanisms, her arms were her figures of speech, which would falter yet she'd find a new stroke;

because my friend in Idaho texted me "inscribe the abyss we are," after a week of no response to my texting her, and I found the quote in my copy of Cixous, did she know I would?;

because this journal will go on filling, though what I've now written I'm ready to type into my laptop, it's as much as I want to transcribe, for now, as much as I will inscribe in a typeface;

because I have to stop somewhere, even as cursive goes on falling and rising and falling in my intuition, I won't ever be able to get it all to a page;

because I can prop the journal beside my laptop and see that my handwriting has changed and changed again over even the past month;

because that the word "abyss," when I handwrite it, is itself an archeology that has reshaped itself, even as it remains frightening;

because a word that remains frightening, as Oppen reminds me, is a place to begin again and again;

FROM: NOTES FROM THE UNDERSTORY (TO BE PUBLISHED)

notes from the understory (level 5)

such that dust without my knowing
is a subtle swirling viscosity surrounding you & me
always or only the 'always' I know as this life
dust is the cohesion & creates coherence between us
dust of what all of us are & have been or at least
this planet's numinous phenomenal 'all of us' as such
its consistency heightens my facility to sense
the dead
whom I can't recognize without allowing for
what will become of me

notes from the understory (level 17, room one)

I close my left eye to find a means to focus
on the mocking bird I hear out my window
imprisoning sight in the iris of my right
where bird's song snags & deadfalls into silence.
soundless vibrations continue

to make ripples in the window's
decades-old glass. I won't see them happen. I am
myself buried in the understory
while above me fetid soil glistens with fresh
tracks of a snail meeting its mate.

notes from the understory (level 17, room two)

a bird's beak narrows to infinity
the more its breast-feathers bulk with light
& burn my eyes with their all-consuming shine.
six pigeons eating scraps under the overpass
hiss in unison.
the loose dog scavenging in spilled garbage
turns, glances nearly in my direction
then runs into their midst & they swallow him.
was I six? when the animal figurines
my mother kept in a curio cabinet
& let no one touch
fell five feet
to the kitchen linoleum
in the middle of the night
during a small California earthquake
that only her figurines felt.
what I'd thought were easily-classified expressions
painted shut on their porcelain faces
had always been watching
what I only now let myself ask if I have ever seen.

note from the understory (level 17, room three)

I yawn with the hope of opening more orifices.
the mossy forest floor is no more my perception
than leaves are their shadows

notes from the understory (level 17, room five)

sun moves behind the horizon, I let myself lose sight's
directive perception,
& perception's potential expands.
I can willfully open my eyes, but can I open
the enacting energy
from which "opening" itself arises?
crow on the phone-wire cocks his head,
I call it "listening"
& the word deafens me to what "listening"

might mean to me,
to crow.
I fall into patterns of thought—create one example
& listen for others to follow,
while clouds gather & release unidentifiable dimensions above me.
I have ways to frighten myself, but they are
seemingly controllable
as paying for the travelling show's rollercoaster ride.
I ignore the feral cat's eyes
in the backyard illuminating what in the dark will appear as only
the first dark this cat observes.
I imagine this black & white cat combing one knotted darkness
from another darkness.
I've missed seeing how deftly the cat vanishes
into a night within a night that I will not let myself go near.

notes from the understory (layer 20, direction one)

All of it begins. I'm soaked to the skin by a sudden downpour.
My gray silk blouse won't come free from the skin of my chest,
my arms. I abandon the meanings of silk and skin to
a moth-wing thinness, fluttering skyward.
Sun returns to warm the blue question of what sky might
become, which remains answerless as it fills with what
seem to be clouds, but they're only potential.
All of it begins. I ask if there are still sleeves wetly affixed
to what I thought were my arms? Will I act within only
one meaning of "arms"?
Judith Butler offers me Merleau-Ponty's reply—
the meaning of flesh is texture, which returns to,
and conforms to, itself.
It begins. I wear flesh wet. I wear it moth-wing thin.
Judith Butler recounts how Merleau-Ponty's sentences
surround her, adding flesh to her grammatical nature.
My grammatical nature is a moth still in larvae form,
not yet ready to change in ways I needn't predict.

notes from the understory (layer 20, direction two)

Can a word have a "nape"? Out my window this morning,
I see a mother-cat walking the top of my wooden fence.
She has the nape of a kitten in her mouth.
In her thrift of movement nothing of her purpose
is exposed, which makes the inwardness of her
intention more densely exist.
This is how it begins: I watch the cat's body move

so deftly into itself that I believe it disappears.
I have the nape of the word "misapprehension"
in my mouth. I carry it without harming even
one of its syllables.
From Merleau-Ponty I learn that a relation can only
be relayed by a middle voice that will arise figuratively
between the acting and acted-upon.
It begins. I see morning's mist from my window.
I walk outside to feel its cool density surround me
as it has surrounded all beings since there first were
misty mornings on earth.
I let the mist carry me by the nape of my neck.
I am light to carry.

notes from the understory (layer 20, direction three)

Unable to sleep last night, I opened Judith Butler. "Feeling,
precipitated by the touch of another, initiates one's sense of 'I'."
I remember her recounting how she let herself be touched
by a phrase she'd read in Merleau-Ponty.
From my open window, I hear something make a rhythmic
rustling sound that I first think might be words, if words could
move through my yard's tall weeds.
I listen for what this might mean, as I let the sound touch me.
A meaning may be bleached down to only the bones
of its nature, a nature that one might give flesh to.
I want to be touched by whatever moves through the foxtails
and fescue I've let grow thick and wild.
I go outside.
"The elusive condition of one's own emergence continues
to inform each and every touch, as this is its ineffability,"
says Judith Butler.
My emphasis might be placed on "ineffability," if I were to
grow as thin as these cirrus clouds in the sky.
I look up again. They've vanished.

notes from the understory (layer 34, direction one)

Blue mountain, black cloven hoof, red tint at the rupture of
temporality, green tint on hidden immoralities,
a naked knowable, a virginal myth, an iris of the owl's eye focuses
on the direction of an iambic laugh,
a secret I hear myself whisper and I feel the secret's hands
surround me.
Beside me in bed is Yi-Fu Tuan's text "when we stand steadfast
before an idea, regardless of its strangeness, then the mind frees

itself and roams."
I put the book down and slide under the covers. Heat washes over me in waves luring me deeper than I want to go.
I will not think the thing about death. The thing that I see has vanished from my husband's face when he talks to me.
My husband Ken, more sure-minded than I, knows he won't die from cancer today. The doctor's clinical language a raft that Ken expertly guides.
Ken tells me a dream: he found a thousand dollars, but the trouble it caused made him glad to wake up here in our bed.
The idea of this life we are living is so alive in his eyes that my mind finds itself free to roam.